Notes

See also Hogarth's painting, *Moses before Pharaoh's daughter*, Thomas Coram Foundation

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For the Annual Charity Sermon[1] *at St Mary Woolnoth*

Before the Lord Mayor[2] *usually*

25 March 1787

Proverbs 14:34

Righteousness exalteth a nation:
but sin is a reproach to any people.

The usual judgement of mankind on almost every important point, is so very different from the decision of Scripture that both cannot possibly be true. National prosperity is more commonly estimated by the extent of dominion, by the success of arms in war, and the increase of riches and commerce in peace, whether righteousness flourisheth or not, is seldom taken into account. And the prevalence of sin, of infidelity, dissipation, and profligacy, is deemed a small reproach, compared with a diminution of power and wealth. When our fleets and armies triumphed over all resistance, and spread terror and desolation to the remotest parts of the globe, and the treasures of the East, began to pour in upon us with an almost boundless profusion, this nation was supposed to be highly exalted. But nothing less than the progress of righteousness, and the suppression of sin, can render us truly honourable or take away our reproach, if the Word of God, the great Governor of the Earth, be truth. And this happy charge would do it, though we should lose one province, and one

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[1] probably for the benefit of Langbourne-Ward Charity School
[2] John Burnell, Lord Mayor of London, 1787

empire after another, and we should be deprived of our boasted consequence among the nations of the earth.

The sentences in the book of Proverbs are for the most part contrasted, and we may therefore fix the sense of righteousness in this passage, by considering it as the opposite to sin. Sin which is the reproach of our nature, of every person, family, village, city and kingdom in which it is found, is that inward principal of the heart, and that outward course of conduct, which is contrary to our relation to God as his creatures, and to the tenor of his revealed will. A right disposition of heart towards God, and a conduct in all points regulated by the authority and rule of his Holy Word, is this righteousness which exalteth a nation, and so far is this wanting the most powerful, opulent, civilized and enlightened Empire, with all its supposed attainments, advantages and distinctions, is discoveredly [revealed] the subject of reproach and contempt.

I shall:

1. delineate the character of a righteous man and then
2. consider how a nation (which is composed of a multitude of individuals) would be exalted, if this character was universally or even generally prevalent.

1. That mankind are very far [from][original righteousness is the doctrine of our Church. Article 9. But the authority of our church or of any church would be of small weight, unless supported and proved by the testimony of Scripture. They are *so very far* gone, that when God looked down upon the children of men, to see if there were any good among them, the result of his enquiry is declared, Psalm 14, Romans 3, *There is none righteous, no not one, there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.* That sobriety, benevolence and equity which entitle men to respect as members of society, is very far short of righteousness, unless connected with the

knowledge, love and fear of the Great God in whom we live and move and have our being. He is our Creator, Supreme Lawgiver and Benefactor, and therefore our first and highest regards are due to him. Unless we love, serve, trust, believe and obey him, we are not righteous, we are not honest ~~nor have any just claim to~~ morality, so much praised, so little practiced, [?] implies the right discharge of all our relative duties; and our first and highest relation being that in which we stand to our Maker; if he is le ft out, our pretence to morality is vain ~~the morality of which we boast is worthless and lifeless~~. This the righteous man has felt. He has been convinced of loving, serving or trusting the creature more than the Creator n- of preferring his own will to the will of God, of seeking happiness in something short of the favour and glory of God, and in the prophetic language – of forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out to himself broken cisterns that can hold in water.

The righteous man has therefore seen himself to be a sinner, and he has taken his measures of sin, from the majesty and Goodness of God against whom he has sinned, and has been thereby constrained to adopt the language of Job, *Behold I am vile* [Job 40:4]. He is in no degree righteous, till brought to acknowledge that the description of the state and mind[?] of a sinner which he reads in the Bible is true, and is a description of himself. But he likewise reads of a Saviour, in whom God is well pleased; he believes the record God has given of his Son, obeys the command, and accepts the invitation to trust in this saviour, renouncing very other hope. For if God has commended his wisdom and love to mankind in this appointment, only they who approve it and accede to it can be righteous.

The righteous man therefore is he who has peace with God through Jesus Christ, who as redeemed by blood from the desire and dominion of sin, is no longer his won. He is now the willing servant of God, devoted to

the will and glory, trusts in his promises, is governed by his precepts, and seeks happiness only in his favour.

2. Whatever be the situation of the righteous man, he is an ornament and a blessing to the commu[nity?]. If he be in authority he ruleth over men in the fear of God. Whether seated upon a throne, or in a subordinate station in public life, his power, influence and example so far as they extend, are employed in promoting the public good – to encourage the love of righteousness in others, to vindicate the oppressed, maintain order and suppress wickedness. The God whom he serves teaches him for his station and supports him. His principles render him superior to the selfish craft which often passes for wisdom in the world, and the fear of God secures[?] him from that fear of man which bringeth a snare. The righteous man is the true patriot, who wrestles for his country by prayer in secret, and devotes his talents to promote the good of all around him.

The righteous man in private life is a good citizen. He respects and obeys the government and laws under which he lives. He is willing by subject to lawful authority (and obeys) not form constraint or for the sake of filthy lucre, but for conscience sake. If he be rich, the grace of God teaches him to be humble, moderate and benevolent. If he be poor, it teaches him patience and contentment, to be quiet in the land, diligent in his calling. As a relative, the righteous man is a kind and compassionate master, a good husband, a punctual trader, a faithful, upright servant, in very relation endeavouring to approve himself to[?] God and to do [unto] others as he would wish others in a like situation should do unto him. He is sober and temperate in all things, gentle, forbearing and forgiving. Because in every situation he endeavours to adore the doctrine of God his Saviour in all things, and is no farther directly concerned in the affairs of this life, than to let his might so shine in his allotted department, that others may glorify God on his behalf.

I think it undeniable that if this righteousness were diffused among all ranks and orders of men, there would be reason to say, happy are the people that are in such a state. Discord, envy, hatred, prodigality, covetousness, sensuality and a long train of evils which fill the world with woe, would be banished from among them. each one in his sphere would contribute to the good of the whole, and God thus served and thus honoured, would be their bulwark and shield, a wall of fire round about them, and a glory in the midst of them.

But where sin, the neglect of God and of his laws prevail – it is a present reproach – and will prove them a foolish and unwise, an ungrateful and base spirited people. A want of public spirit in superiors, a readiness to sacrifice every valuable consideration to the selfish calls of ambition or interest - And in the inferior classes impatience of subordination, licentiousness under the pretence of liberty – the indulgence of hurtful passions – In general (weak counsels, rash enterprises) dissensions, riots – r[...d] f[...] and constitutions, distracted families, tyrannical masters, treacherous servants, bankruptcies, robberies, rapes and murders, crowded jails and places of worship almost empty, would mark the character of the nation and of the times. And these things would in their own nature, not only be a reproach, but tend to the ruin of the people.

God has sometimes showed his displeasure against sin, by public and severe judgments – thus he brought a flood upon the old world, and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire. But if he only leaves a people to themselves, their ruin will be equally certain, and perhaps equally terrible. He inflicted no heavier punishment than this upon the Jews, after they had filled up the measure of their iniquities by crucifying the Son of God. He did not visit them with earthquakes or hurricanes, but he gave them up to the ay of their own hearts. Their ruin quickly followed, they brought it upon themselves, with such a complicated concurrence of calamities as were never suffered by any other people upon earth.

Whether we are a people exalted by the love and practice of righteousness – or whether sin, enormous sin, be our

reproach, and a just cause for fear lest it involve us in ruin, I leave to your observation and to your consciences. I hope there are amongst you many righteous persons, and many more who feel some concern for the wickedness and misery around you. May God enable you according to your several opportunities to contribute to our national honour, and to the removal of our reproach by joining heartily in the cause of righteousness, and by discountenancing sin.

This will lead you to countenance the preaching of the Gospel, which is the appointment and power of God to salvation through faith in this name. The people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. The glorious Gospel of Christ is like the sun, when this light shines and is perceived – the darkness of iniquity and misery flee before it.

Much likewise may be done by the united efforts of persons of character and influence, to enforce the laws of the land. The gross and shameful profanation of the Lord's day, the multitudes of unhappy prostitutes who throng our streets, to ensnare the unwary, the many vile prints and pamphlets exposed to sale which are calculated to excite and disseminate lewedness, are no less contrary to law and sound policy, than to religion. They are a disgrace to our *police*, and though tolerated with impunity in a land called Christian, would not, I am persuaded, have been permitted under the ancient heathen governments of Greece and Rome.

How many are the snares spread for unexperienced youth, which too frequently counteract the advantages of education and good example. But the children of the poor, destitute of these advantages, many of them without advice and without restraint, if no friendly hand is stretched out for their relief, are peculiarly exposed. It is a subject of lamentation rather than wonder that numbers grow up in the habits of idleness, drunkenness and dishonesty, that they are bold in the way of evil and neither fear God nor regard man. That from smaller they proceed to greater wickedness, that beggars and thieves abound everywhere, that neither our persons nor our property, nor dwellings, are safe, and that so many are brought to an untimely end, as every sessions and assize. Who can say

how many of these evils are prevented by the charitable institutions and support of schools, for poor and otherwise friendless children? Considered with respect to the good of society these charities deserve your attention. And I trust in many instances they will prove of still greater importance in a religious view. If some, if but a few, if even but one of the children before you, besides being put in the path of honest industry, should be partakers of that righteousness which I have described, it will compensate for the expense. Who that had seen Moses cast out upon the water, would have expected that he would one day become the deliverer and leader of Israel? I would animate you with the hope that amongst these children there may be some who in future life will appear in a very different situation, and by the providence and grace of God be qualified for great usefulness in society – patterns and promoters of that righteousness that exalteth a nation.

Arguments to recommend a charity of this kind are so obvious, and so often repeated, that it is not necessary to say much even to those who are only occasionally present today. To my stated hearers I need not say a single word. It would be ungrateful in me to think you need persuasion after the repeated proofs you have given of your readiness. Hitherto, on the annual day when we have been honoured with the presence of the Chief Magistrate of the City and the Sheriffs, I have been desire to appoint a preacher - this year I was desired to preach the sermon myself. If the Lord Mayor had not been prevented by indisposition from attendance, the auditory would probably have been larger. However I cheerfully rely on your kindness, that notwithstanding this disappointment, you will not permit the Charity to suffer upon my account. May God so enthuse the hearts of this assembly, and so direct you to improve the talents he has entrusted you with, that in the great day of His appearance, you may be found in the number of those who have been instrumental in turning many to righteousness, and who shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and like the stars for ever and ever.

Amen.